

On Sleeping with Friends

By William O. Pate II, published in St. Edward's University's *Arete*, 2002-2003
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“What I’m saying is — and this is not a come-on in any way, shape or form — is that men and women can’t be friends because the sex part always gets in the way.”

—*When Harry Met Sally*

A recent story in *New York* magazine caught my eye. Entitled “The New Position on Casual Sex,” it aimed to inform the reader of the new sexual openness brought about by the rise of Internet dating services. In it, Vanessa Grigoriadis, the author, recounted the experiences of numerous New York City women who utilized various online dating services as means of acquiring quick dates and quick sex. In the passage most disturbing to me, a young woman said, “I don’t want to give men that I might want to date the wrong idea by having sex with them, but I don’t want to live without sex.” She went on to add, “Now, isn’t that the most bizarre twenty-first-century quandary?” (Grigoriadis).

I’ll concede that it is a quandary, but not in the way she intended. Rather, what struck me as odd was this woman’s unwillingness to sleep with the guys she already knew and in which she was interested. Lost in my 1950s-style ideas of courtship, I thought people were *supposed* to sleep with those they’re interested in – friends, dating partners, not just random folks they thought looked good in grainy online photographs. So I did what any young male does who feels that he is soon-to-be marginalized in the dating and sex scenes; I complained to my female friends and begged them for clarification.

Why, I asked them, would you sleep with a random guy instead of a friend or a guy you are interested in? “Easy,” they replied after calming me down and forcing me to speak more slowly. “We don’t want to have sex with someone we’re *really* interested in too early because it takes the relationship to a level it isn’t ready for.” I mulled this over and decided: I can understand that logically and still think it’s completely ridiculous, can’t I?

The struggle here is not to come off sounding like just another angry guy who’s tired of having loads of friends that are girls but never any girlfriends. While in the abstract seeking sexual gratification from people you don’t know and reserving friends for emotional gratification seems fine, looking at the conundrum more closely forces one to wonder, “Why can’t friendships encompass both?” I do indeed believe friendships can and *should* be used to the full extent of emotional and sexual gratification, especially if someone is so desperate that he or she must call up random people from Internet personal ads for sex. However, there are those who disagree.

Talk to almost anyone, especially a girl, and the person will tell you how friends shouldn’t have sex with friends. Almost in an ironic play on the anti-drinking and driving motto, “Friends Don’t Let Friends Drive Drunk,” society’s conventional wisdom seems to be that “Friends Don’t Sleep With Friends.” Or, at least, they *shouldn’t* sleep with friends. More often it seems an ideal of which we regularly fall short. But why does this limitation exist? Why the strict distinction between friendship and romance? Why the almost automatic rejection of a dual-use friendship?

Invariably, the predictions of many lay persons focus on the passionate desperation which follows a failure to achieve the ideal of a clear separation between one's friendships and romantic relationships. These predictions often include the belief that there will be an expectation of one member of the friendship desiring more intimacy with the other, an increasing amount of awkwardness stemming from the beloved's not sharing the lover's feelings, and, ultimately, the end of the friendship.

It might be proper to begin by noting that only in conversations with women have I found the "no sex with friends" stance prevalent. While I do not intend this to reflect a scientific study conducted on my part, the random sampling of individuals around the St. Edward's University campus and city of Austin that I have spoken to regarding this issue have been divided along gender lines as to their views in regards to sleeping with friends. No male respondent agreed with the distinction between relationship and physical intimacy roles and few females crossed over from the "no sex with friends" camp to agree with the male viewpoint. This may be because, as Dr. Lillian B. Rubin, a researcher, writer, and counselor on relationship issues, reports, "For a woman, there's no satisfactory sex without an emotional connection; for a man, the two are more easily separated" (101). Indeed, if, as Rubin goes on to state, "women depend on the emotional attachment to call up the sexual, men rely on the sexual to spark the emotional," the reasons for this division become clearer (104). This extends into the gay and lesbian world where homosexual men derive pleasure from anonymous sexual encounters more often than do homosexual females (105). Reasons for this stem from males' and females' differing attachments and identifications in early childhood. On the other hand, more scientific research has found that a majority of men also believe that sex inside a platonic relationship leads to negative outcomes (Afifi and Faulkner 208). Either way, this should not be construed as meaning that women are less sexual than men or that all members of either sex fall into these proscribed categories. There are always exceptions. Indeed, the *New York* magazine article quoted above quickly bears this out.

On the contrary, I believe having sex with a friend does not necessarily lead to the end of the friendship. While some researchers, and many lay persons, have argued that having sex with a friend moves the relationship from the platonic to the romantic level, little quantitative data exist to verify this (Afifi and Faulkner 206). Much more evidence is available that links the sexual attraction of one friend to the other as being a prevalent factor of cross-sex friendships (friendships comprised of two people of opposite sex) (205). Indeed, to the possible revulsion of some of my female friends, I often find that quite a lot of our friendship, especially in the beginning stages, is/was based on my own sexual attraction to them. A recent study conducted by Dr. Walid A. Afifi, a speech communications professor, and Sandra L. Faulkner, a researcher at East Carolina University, found that 51% of platonic ("people who [respondents] were not dating at the time and had no intentions of dating at the time [of the sexual event]") friends had engaged in sexual activity, and 34% claimed to have engaged in sexual activity with an opposite sex friend on multiple occasions (whether that be with more than one friend or the same friend numerous times) (217). Their study also produced findings that challenge the usual assertion that sleeping with friends inevitably hurts the friendship. Sixty-seven percent of the participants reported an *increase* in the quality of the relationship after the sexual encounter with the majority of these *not* evolving into romantic relationships (218). Another study conducted at the University of Michigan found "no difference in the quality of friendship between men and women that involved sexual relationships and those that

did not” (Elkins and Peterson). As the first argument always trotted out by believers in the sanctity of friendships, the corrupting effect sex has upon that hallowed interpersonal territory does not quite wash when viewed through the lens of science. Increasingly, the support for abstaining from sleeping with friends appears to derive from specific individuals’ experiences rather than the existence of a general causal relation. Thus, begging the question, “Why, if a majority of platonic sexual encounters end in relationship-enhancement, do some others end so horribly?”

My own experiences in sleeping with friends corroborate this data. As a matter of fact, few people I discussed this topic with would admit to sex having a detrimental effect on their friendships. There are even those who regularly engage in “no-strings” sexual activity with friends and others as a way around dealing with the responsibility and large consumption of time a full-blown relationship entails. One might think that with so much empirical data floating around the world, sexual friendships would be more well-respected and popular. But, still, the cliché persists: Having sex with friends is bad because it leads to awkwardness, those afflicted with the negative effects of sex between friends vaguely repeat. One might ask, then, “Why does sex cause this awkwardness?” If, as shown above, sex does not always cause awkwardness, it may be more appropriate to ask, “What is this awkwardness?” Possibly a cause can be found in the definition.

Much of the awkwardness seems to arise from an uncertainty about the relationship – the direction it is taking, agreements between parties, reciprocal responsibilities of the parties, jealousy, et cetera. It may be because we are so used to seeing or assuming romantic relationships evolve from platonic friendships that cross-sex friends are afraid to hold State of the Union discussions, an important aspect of healthy interpersonal interaction (Afifi and Burgoon). There is a great body of literature discussing topic avoidance, the shrinking from broaching certain subjects which might bring discomfort to one or both participants, in cross-sex friend’s conversations. This paper avoids this topic. It is important to recognize, though, the significant positive impact communication between friends can have both before and after a sexual encounter. Indeed, many researchers have found that self-disclosure, the discussion with a friend of relationship issues, negative life experiences, dating and sexual experiences, and other things, is considered the most important aspect of intimacy in friendships (Afifi and Guerrero).

Friendships should be redefined to describe what they include; not what they exclude. The facts show that a more clear definition of friendship includes the emotional intimacy bound up with self-disclosure more than a lack of sexual intimacy. Indeed, sexual intimacy among friends, it appears, can have a positive effect on friendships, too, especially if they are already communicating openly with one another about their relationship. Writing off sex as harmful is a poor excuse for refusing to understand the underlying issues that make sleeping with a friend a detrimental experience. Sleeping with friends is not a black-and-white endeavor. Depending on the individuals involved and their willingness to openly discuss their relationship, the challenge of sexual intimacy can have either a positive or negative effect on the relationship (Monsour 145). The oft-spoken cliché that friendships can’t survive sexual encounters without becoming romantically involved just isn’t true.

In my experience, the most harmful aspect of sleeping with friends is the fact that, thanks to the societal paradigm we operate under which denies us this free expression of our sexual appetites, it often takes place under the influence of heavy amounts of alcohol or other drugs. This leads,

inevitably, to a sexual experience that is embarrassing to the participants – who may or may not have bragged about their sexual prowess to one another at other times. In my opinion, we need “pre-emptive sexual strikes” meant to improve the experience of sleeping with friends by having it while sober, when the act isn’t just a release of hormonal urges, but, rather, an expression of physical intimacy intended to match the emotional intimacy we desire in our friendships. Otherwise, we might as well all be strangers.

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